

*Cirsium vulgare*

[Synonyms : *Ascalea lanceolata*, *Carduus lanceolatus*, *Carduus vulgaris*, *Cirsium abyssinicum*, *Cirsium lanceolatum*, *Cirsium lanceolatum* var. *abyssinicum*, *Cirsium lanceolatum* var. *hypoleucum*, *Cirsium lanceolatum* var. *nemorale*, *Cirsium lanceolatum* var. *vulgare*, *Cirsium sylvaticum*, *Cnicus lanceolatus*, *Cnicus lanceolatus* var. *abyssinicus*, *Eriolepis lanceolata*, *Lophiolepis dubia*]

**SPEAR THISTLE** is an annual or biennial. Native to Europe and the Mediterranean, it has small thistle-like pinkish-purple flower heads.

It is also known as Bank thistle, Bell thistle, Bird thistle, Blue thistle, Boar thistle, Bull thistle, Buck thistle, Bur thistle, Button thistle, *Cardaon béni* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Cirse commun* (French), Common thistle, Cuckoo buttons, *Echte Kratzdistel* (German), *Gewöhnliche Kratzdistel* (German), Hog thistle, Horse thistle, *Lanzenblättrige Kratzdistel* (German), *Lanzett-Kratzdistel* (German), *March Ysgallen* (Welsh), *Pcháč kopinatý* (Czech), *Pcháč obecný* (Czech), *Pichliač obyčajný* (Slovak), Prickly coats, Quat-vessel, Scotch thistle, Scottish thistle, *Skotse Dissel* (Afrikaans), *Soudards* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Speerdistel* (Dutch, German), Thistle, and *Vägtistel* (Swedish).

*Vulgare* means ‘common’.

Spear thistle is edible and used like creeping thistle (*Cirsium arvense*).

Spear thistle and cotton-thistle (*Onopordum acanthium*) have long provided meat for academic debate in the context of heraldry and the Scottish clans. Some authorities believe that the spear thistle is the true Scottish thistle – and at least one authority points out that those who determined the badge of the House of Stuart were not botanists.

But authorities are convinced that it is the spear thistle which features in several old Scottish rituals, including that held in Summer in Langholm in Dumfriesshire. It is understood that the thistle carried during ‘Riding the Marches’ represents the privileges of the commoners that those in authority would tamper with at their peril.

In North America it has been noted that the goldfinch not only collects the down for nest building but is partial to the seeds with their high oil content, especially in Winter.

Known to quite a few North American Indian tribes, the Thompson Indians cooked the fresh roots as a vegetable and also dried them for later use. Hesquiat Indians, according to records, seem instead to have sucked the flower heads for their nectar.

Cherokee North American Indians used the down for the flights of their blow darts.

Spear thistle also provided medicine for quite a few of the North American tribes – medicine used for a surprisingly wide range of ailments. Both the Meskwaki and Potawatomi Indians used spear thistle to mask unpleasant tastes of medicines, and the Navajo used it to cause vomiting. For some of the Chippewa it offered a remedy for stomach cramps, while the Cherokee prescribed it for indigestion. It seems to have been a fairly popular remedy among Iroquois Indians for treating piles – and they also used it in remedies for cancer. Then the Delaware tribe are understood to have included it as an ingredient in steam treatments for muscle problems and rheumatism.

(Authorities have noted that the thistledown could be useful to campers in an emergency, as it would provide ideal tinder.)

It was noted in the early 1980s that the inadvertent introduction of the spear thistle to some sub-Antarctic regions appeared to be cause for consternation among the fur seal population. Their discomfort arose from the plant's unremitting spread on beaches where they mated.